

Family's actions 'do not reflect Malay-Muslim community'

Incident must not affect trust among racial groups: Shanmugam

By ZAKIR HUSSAIN
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

THE actions of Mas Selamat Kastari's brother Asmom and his family in helping him escape two years ago are not a reflection of the wider Malay-Muslim community, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam told Parliament.

The community, he noted, had disapproved of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) leader's deeds, and took part in the manhunt

for him after he broke out of Whitley Road Detention Centre in 2008.

"We should therefore not allow this episode to affect the trust and goodwill that has been built up over the years between our different communities," he said.

"Instead, this episode should reinforce how important it is for every Singaporean to unite together and assist the security agencies to overcome the threat of terrorism from a small number of persons in our society."

Mr Shanmugam made these points in a ministerial statement updating the House on ongoing investigations into how the former fugitive escaped.

Several MPs sought clarifications that the matter would not affect relations among the various communities.

Dr Maliki Osman (Sembawang GRC) said it was "quite shocking to receive this news that Mas Selamat had actually been assisted by his extended family members given the fact that all of Singapore were concerned during that period and given the massive manhunt that took place".

Mr Zaqu Mohamad (Hong Kah GRC) also sought assurance that there would not now be unnecessary scrutiny of Malay-Muslim women wearing the tudung, for example at checkpoints or when they seek employment.

He was referring to the fact that, after leaving his brother's flat in Tampines, Mas Selamat wore a headscarf to disguise himself as a woman to evade detection.

Mr Shanmugam said whether a person is picked for scrutiny does not depend on

what he or she is wearing but on security assessments.

"The Government has consistently stated over the years that the actions of a few are not a reflection of the Malay-Muslim community as a whole," he said.

"Our position remains unchanged."

He added that Malay-Muslims have been supportive of Government efforts to build a tolerant, united community, and have consistently spoken out against violence in the name of any religion.

"There is no reason for employers, or anyone else, to shy away from employing members of the Muslim community or for anyone to use this incident as an excuse to target members of the Malay-Muslim community," he said.

Noting that recruitment to the civil ser-

vice is based on meritocracy, he said: "I can state categorically that this incident will not affect the Government's recruitment policies."

"Employers in the private sector should similarly hire individuals based on their individual suitability for the job."

Dr Ong Seh Hong (Marine Parade GRC) asked Mr Shanmugam if he thought the incident would have an adverse impact on communal relations. He also asked what the Ministry of Home Affairs would do to allay any anxiety the Malay-Muslim community may have.

Mr Shanmugam replied that Singaporeans across all communities will feel disappointed with the actions of Asmom and his family, and that Malay-Muslim Singaporeans view Mas Selamat in the same way other communities do.

The harbouring of the JI leader by his relatives, therefore, had to be seen in context.

Madam Halimah Yacob (Jurong GRC) also asked about efforts to extend rehabilitation services to the Asmom family.

Mr Shanmugam said counselling services will be offered to them, although there is no specific evidence of them being influenced by radical JI ideology.

zakirh@sph.com.sg

Yaacob: I'm very disappointed, but good work must go on

THIS is the text of Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim's statement on the fact that Mas Selamat's family members had aided him in his escape:

"I am very disappointed with what has been revealed.

Harbouring is a very serious offence – more so when it involves a wanted fugitive who was a threat to the whole country – at a time when everyone was deeply concerned and actively looking out for him.

There can be no excuse or sufficient explanation that will help us get over the disappointment.

I am disappointed because we know that Singaporeans from all backgrounds have come together since 2002 – the Malay/Muslim community very prominently – to keep the

lid on the danger of terrorism: reporting suspicious activity, counselling detainees, supporting their spouses and children, going out to the public to disabuse any notion that violence against the innocent is tolerated in Islam, and so on.

We have also come together to build strong ties among faith leaders, and among fellow Singaporeans at the neighbourhoods and communities.

So there is tremendous disappointment.

But we accept it and the good work at all levels must continue.

So we continue to build understanding and confidence, and enhance safety and security to emerge from this episode stronger as a society."



There can be no excuse or sufficient explanation that will help us get over the disappointment, said Dr Yaacob. ST FILE PHOTO



Islam requires every individual to play his or her role in observing and achieving the objective of peaceful living amongst different communities, said Ustaz Fatris. BH FILE PHOTO

Harbouring fugitive is against Islam: Deputy Mufti

DEPUTY Mufti Fatris Bakaram, who assumes the post of Mufti on Jan 1, gave this response to media queries on the arrest of Mas Selamat's relatives:

"As a religion that places great emphasis on peaceful living amongst different communities, Islam requires every individual in society to play his or her role in observing and achieving this objective.

The act of harbouring a known fugitive from the authorities is against Islamic principle.

This is a principle within the Islamic faith that must be upheld by every Muslim, even though the fugitive is a family member or relative.

Prophet Muhammad once stated that even if his daughter

was caught stealing, punishment would still be meted out to her.

The tendency to help, protect or defend a family member or next-of-kin is a natural instinct of a human being.

But it is not acceptable in Islam, if in doing so, it will jeopardise the peace and security of society and the country.

Allah says in the Quran (Chapter 4: verse 135): 'O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah; even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor, Allah is a Better Protector to both (than you).

So follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you avoid justice, and if you distort your witness or refuse to give it, verily, Allah is Ever Well-Acquainted with what you do.'

Social fabric will hold, say community and religious leaders

COMMUNITY and religious leaders yesterday said they were confident that the social fabric would not be torn by the disclosure that Mas Selamat Kastari's family members had harboured him.

They said national efforts to build trust between people of different races and religions had made it clear to most that the majority of Muslims in Singapore were against extremism of any form.

Mr Chua Thian Poh, president of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, spoke for many when he said: "Most Singaporeans know that the majority of Muslims are against terrorists."

Bishop Robert Solomon, president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, added that "very few people, if any, would link this incident with the rest of the Muslim community".

Dr Solomon noted that the community "has clearly rejected Mas Selamat's terrorist ways and stood with other Singaporeans in seeking to build a safe and peaceful nation".

Many among the 10 leaders interviewed yesterday added that while few would feel sorry for the Jemaah Islamiah leader's relatives, many can understand the natural instinct to help a family member, even one who has broken the law.

Mas Selamat's niece Nur Aini received 18 months' jail for harbouring him, while his brother Asmom and sister-in-law Aisah got 12 months and three months respectively.

As Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam pointed out: "The court is likely to have given weight to the fact that the assistance was not premeditated; rather, the three persons appear to have acted on misguided instincts of family ties on the spur of the moment."

However, Deputy Mufti Fatris Bakaram made clear that harbouring a known fugitive from the authorities is against Islamic principles.

Mr Rhazaly Noentil, a member of the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group, which looks after detainees' families, felt the relatives could have persuaded Mas Selamat to surrender himself, especially as his escape was widely publicised.

Ustaz Ali Haji Mohamed, co-chairman of the Religious Rehabilitation Group which counsels terror detainees, felt the relatives did not understand that their actions had wider implications for the country's security and relations between different communities.

He added: "We are prepared to step forward and help counsel them if we are given the opportunity."

Community leaders also credited efforts to nurture social bonds and break down ethnic barriers with helping to ensure that episodes like the present incident do not harm race relations.

These include the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) in all constituencies, which were mooted in 2002, and the five-year-old Community Engagement Programme to reduce tensions in a crisis.

Eunos IRCC chairman S. Lakshmanan said that ever since grassroots and religious leaders in his neighbourhood started meeting regularly through the IRCC network eight years ago, they have been able to ask one another sensitive questions about things like terror arrests in a frank manner.

This, in turn, helps them explain to their friends and circles that the actions of a few misguided individuals do not reflect the thinking of the community they come from.

As Braddell Heights IRCC chairman Bernard Chiang put it: "We do not look at the race or religion of the perpetrator, we look at the person himself."

Added Nominated MP Teo Siong Seng, president of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry: "We must look at things objectively and not generalise about any community."

MP Alvin Yeo, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said episodes like the present one are a test for such groups.

"I am reasonably confident we'll be able to withstand this," he said.

ZAKIR HUSSAIN



RELIGIOUS, COMMUNITY LEADERS HAVE BEEN WORKING ON HARMONY

"It is natural for family members to protect one another. But this incident does not represent the Muslim community at large.

"I think it will not affect our social cohesion, because all along, our religious and community leaders have been working to build on our harmony.

"But we cannot be complacent and have to be careful that such incidents do not affect the peace we now have."

Venerable Kwang Sheng, president of the Singapore Buddhist Federation



STAND TOGETHER RESOLUTELY AGAINST THREATS TO PEACE

"This incident will not affect the strong and growing relationships of trust between the various races and religious communities that have been carefully built over the years.

"I think very few people, if any, would link this incident with the rest of the Muslim community, which has clearly rejected Mas Selamat's terrorist ways and stood with other Singaporeans in seeking to build a safe and peaceful nation.

"Together with our Muslim friends and neighbours, the rest of us should stand resolutely against anyone who threatens our nation's peace and security."

Dr Robert Solomon, Bishop of the Methodist Church and president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore



FAMILY TIES CANNOT COME BEFORE THE LAW, JUSTICE

"From the perspective of familial ties, we can understand. But familial ties cannot come before the law and justice.

"As the head of a radical group, Mas Selamat did pose a danger to our society. But that is his own personal position, he does not represent the whole Muslim community. Singapore's Muslim organisations are all peace-loving, friendly and tolerant.

"Singapore's 10 major religions, religious leaders and their followers all understand the importance of peace and respecting each others' religion. We also continually strive for the different races and religions to co-exist peacefully together."

Mr Tan Thiam Lye, chairman of the Taoist Federation and president of the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore